

AN
ADDRESS
ON
THE STATE OF SLAVERY
IN THE
WEST INDIA ISLANDS,
FROM THE COMMITTEE OF THE
Leicester Auxiliary
ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY.

LONDON:

SOLD BY T. HAMILTON, PATER NOSTER ROW;
AND BY T. COMBE, LEICESTER.

M.DCCC.XXIV.

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Leicester.**

PROCEEDINGS.

AT a Meeting of persons, inhabitants of the Town of Leicester and its Vicinity, held the 17th of December, 1823,

THOMAS BABINGTON, Esq.

IN THE CHAIR;

Resolved,

1. That the individuals composing the present Meeting are deeply impressed with the conviction that the state of Slavery is repugnant to justice, humanity, and sound policy, to the principles of the British Constitution, and to the spirit of the Christian religion ; and that they cannot consider the legal perpetuation of Slavery, in principle more defensive than the Slave Trade itself.

2. That they call to mind, with sorrow and shame, that there are eight hundred thousand persons in a state of personal Slavery in the Colonies of Great Britain, deprived of those civil privileges and religious advantages to which, as our fellow-subjects, they are entitled.

3. That although a hope was long indulged, that the Abolition of the Slave Trade would have produced most beneficial consequences to the Slave population in the Colonies, no effectual steps have been taken, during the sixteen years which have elapsed since that event, for mitigating in any material degree the evils of Negro bondage, or for putting an end to a system which outrages every feeling of humanity.

4. That the House of Commons having, during the last Session of Parliament, unanimously passed the following resolutions, viz.

“ 1. That it is expedient to adopt effectual and decisive measures for meliorating the condition of the Slave population in his Majesty's Colonies.

“ 2. That, through a determined and persevering, but judicious and temperate, enforcement of such measures, this House looks forward to a progressive improvement in the character of the Slave population; such as may prepare them for a participation in those civil rights and privileges which are enjoyed by other classes of his Majesty's subjects.

“ 3. That this House is anxious for the accomplishment of this purpose at the earliest period that may be compatible with the well-being of the Slaves, the safety of the Colonies, and with a fair and equitable consideration of the state of property therein.”

the individuals present feel themselves called upon to promote these objects to the utmost of their power, by all prudent and lawful means.

5. That for this purpose, a Society be now formed in Leicester and its Vicinity, as an Auxiliary to the Society for the

Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions.

6. That subscriptions be received by the Treasurer, at the Bank of Messrs. Mansfield and Co. and by the Secretary ; and that all persons subscribing annually to the Society be Members of it, and be entitled to attend and vote at all General Meetings.

7. That all persons subscribing ten shillings or upwards yearly, or five pounds at one time, be Governors of the Society.

8. That the business of the Society be conducted by a President, a Treasurer, a Secretary, and a Committee, consisting of not less than fifteen Governors, and that five constitute a quorum ; and that the President, Treasurer, and Secretary be, *ex officio*, members of the Committee.

9. That the Committee meet once every two months, and at such other times as they may fix, and call General Meetings of the Subscribers when they shall judge it requisite ; and that any five members of it be authorised to direct the Secretary to summon a Special Meeting of the Committee, giving three days notice thereof.

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OF THE
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FOR THE

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THROUGHOUT THE BRITISH DOMINIONS.

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Secretary,

WILLIAM L. HANBURY, Esq.

ERRATUM.

Page 13, line 14, After *onus probandi*, insert "the obligation."

ADDRESS,

&c. &c.

THAT slavery is the most deplorable condition to which human nature can be reduced, is too evident to require the labour of proof. By subjecting one human creature to the absolute control of another, it annihilates the most essential prerogative of a reasonable being, which consists in the power of determining his own actions, in every instance in which they are not injurious to others. The right improvement of this prerogative is the source of all the virtue and happiness of which the human race is susceptible. Slavery introduces the most horrible confusion, since it degrades human beings from the denomination of persons to that of things; and by merging the

interests of the slave in those of the master, he becomes a mere appendage to the existence of another, instead of preserving the dignity which belongs to a reasonable and accountable nature. Knowledge and virtue are foreign to his state; ignorance the most gross, and dispositions the most depraved, are requisite to reduce him to a level with his condition.

But degrading as slavery is, in its mildest form, that species of it which prevails in our West India Colonies is of the very worst description, far less tolerable than that which subsisted in Greece and Rome during the reign of paganism. It would be difficult to find a parallel to it in any age or nation, with the exception of those unhappy persons who are carried captive by the piratical states of Barbary. Scourged, branded, and sold at the discretion of their masters, the slaves in our West India Islands are doomed to a life of incessant toil for the benefit of those, from whom they receive no recompense whatever: they are indebted for their principal subsistence to the cultivation of small portions of land allotted them under the name of provision grounds: and the only time ordinarily allowed for that purpose, is the day which the laws of all Christian states have devoted to rest. On that day, instead of being assembled to listen to the oracles of God, and to imbibe the

consolations of piety, they are necessitated to work for their living, and to dispose of the produce of their labour at the public market; the natural consequence is, that the far greater part of them are as ignorant of the first principles of Christianity, as though they had remained in the land of their forefathers.

They are driven to the field by the cart whip. They are followed by a driver, with this dreadful instrument constantly in his hand, with which he is empowered to inflict, at his own discretion, a certain number of lashes on their backs, with no exception whatever in favor of the softer sex. — During the four or five months of their harvest, they are compelled to protract their labour through half the night, or through the whole of each alternate night. They are every moment liable to be removed at the will of their masters, to the remotest parts of the Island, or to be transported into other Islands. The ties of kindred are violently torn asunder, and the mother and children often assigned to different purchasers, and separated to distant parts. The ordinance of marriage is scarcely known among them; while the most unrestrained licentiousness and profligacy of manners, as well in their intercourse with each other, as with the Whites, is indulged and encouraged.

The practice of emancipation, which has long prevailed to a great extent, and been followed by the happiest effects in the old Spanish Colonies, is discountenanced by the laws of our Colonies, and loaded with such heavy fines in some of them, as almost to amount to a prohibition. The design of such regulations is unquestionably to confer perpetuity on the present system, and extinguish in the breast of the Negroes the faintest hope of the enjoyment of freedom.

Nothing was wanting to complete the misery of such a state, except to attach absolute impunity to the atrocities which the unlimited subjection of the weak to the strong is sure to produce ; and this is amply provided for by that regulation universally adopted in our Colonies, which excludes the testimony of a Negro against a White Inhabitant. In consequence of this law, the vilest miscreant may inflict whatever cruelties he pleases on the wretched Blacks, providing he takes care that no White person be present. There are laws, it is true, which constitute the murder of a Negro a capital offence, and which limit the measure of his punishment ; but as if for the very purpose of rendering them nugatory and ridiculous, conviction is made to depend on a circumstance attending the perpetration of crimes, which it is most easy to exclude. Thus, in opposition to the

genius of all enlightened legislation, the greatest facilities are presented to oppression—the greatest impediments thrown in the way of detection—and, in all that relates to the treatment of slaves, the voice of truth is silenced, evidence suppressed, the claims of justice studiously defeated, and the redress of the most atrocious injuries rendered next to impossible.

There is another particular in the state of the laws respecting Negroes, too remarkable to be passed over in silence. It is the obvious dictate of justice, and the practice of all civilized states, that till guilt is proved, innocence shall be presumed; and that the *onus probandi* of adducing evidence shall rest with the accuser in the first instance. In the West India Islands the reverse of this is established, and every Negro, or Man of Colour, though free, is *presumed* to be a slave, and liable to be treated as such, unless he can furnish documentary evidence of his freedom. It is enacted that the presumption shall always be taken against him: so that if he loses his certificate of freedom, or it is stolen from him, it is at the option of any person to claim him, and replunge him into the horrors of slavery. By this means many are daily deprived of their freedom; and the danger of incurring that calamity is daily suspended over the heads of the innocent.

It is no small aggravation of the cruelty of this system, that its unhappy victims have not been exposed to it as the punishment of crime, but by the violence of ruffians, who having traversed the ocean in quest of human prey, forcibly tore them from their native shores, and the embraces of their dearest relatives, in order to expose them to sale in a distant quarter of the globe. The forms of judicial inquiry, the examination of witnesses, the proof of guilt, and the sentence of a judge, were not the precursors of this most dire calamity ; it was the assault of brutal violence on helpless weakness and unsuspecting innocence—it was the grasp of the marauder and the assassin, hurrying away his victims, amidst shrieks of horror and the piercing accents of despair, which prepared these scenes of woe. These, and the descendants of these, are the persons who compose the Black population of our Islands. Their number is computed at present at 800,000 ; and if we direct our view to that portion of the British Dominions, we behold the shocking spectacle of nearly a million of our fellow-subjects, with no other imputation than that of a darker skin, doomed to a condition, which were it assigned as the punishment of the greatest guilt, would be accused of immoderate severity. We behold these children of nature, for the purpose chiefly of supplying us with the ingredient which

sweetens our repasts, compelled by men, who call themselves Christians, to exhaust to its dregs a more bitter cup than is usually allotted to the greatest adepts in crime.

It is confidently asserted by the advocates of slavery, that the situation of the Negroes in our Islands is preferable to that of the labouring classes in England. But the falsehood of this assertion is sufficiently proved by the numerous elopements which take place there: on referring to a very recent Jamaica paper, we observe a list of more than a hundred runaway slaves, so that admitting this to be a fair specimen of what usually occurs, the number of slaves who attempt to escape from their masters in one Island only, amounts annually to five or six thousand. It appears that the far greater part were branded, many of them in different parts of the body, and not a few are designated by their wounds and sores, the effects of immoderate punishment. A moment's reflection must convince us, that the condition must be intolerable from which such numbers daily attempt their escape, at the hazard of tortures and of death.

We are in possession of a religion the communication of which would afford some compensation for the injuries we have inflicted, and let in a

ray of hope on the benighted mind. To say that no effectual provision has been made for this purpose, is to assert the smallest part of the truth. The religious instruction of the Negroes has not only been neglected, but such regulations introduced, as renders it nearly impracticable. The attempts of this sort which have been made, have not resulted from any legislative enactment, but merely from the zeal of private individuals, exposed for the most part to the utmost opposition and obloquy; nor will it admit of a doubt, that but for the seasonable interference of the Government at home, all such proceedings would long since have been suppressed. The Colonial Legislatures have displayed nearly as much aversion to the religious instruction of the slaves, as to the extension of their civil immunities; and judging from their conduct, we should be tempted to infer, they were no less careful to exclude them from the hope of heaven, than from happiness on earth.

It would be natural to suppose, such a system could have few charms for the spectator, that the presence of such a mass of degradation and misery would be a source of continual annoyance, and that no exertion would be spared, by those who have it most in their power, to diminish its pressure, and lighten its horrors. On the contrary, the West India Planters view it with the

utmost complacency, in their eyes it seems to be a most finished and exquisite specimen of social order, a masterpiece of policy, the most precious legacy bequeathed them by their ancestors, which they are bound to maintain inviolate in every part, to defend at the greatest risque, and to transmit unimpaired to future generations. They anticipate with the utmost confidence the perpetual duration of the system, and reprobate every measure which has the remotest tendency to endanger its existence, as the offspring of indescribable folly and wickedness. To such a degree are their moral perceptions vitiated, that they really believe they have a prescriptive right to be guilty of injustice, to trample on the image of their Maker, to erase his superscription, and to treat that portion of their species which fortune has subjected to their power, as mere beasts of burden, divested of the essential characteristics of humanity. In this instance, impious speculations have been resorted to in palliation of practical enormities; nor have there been wanting those who avow their persuasion that the Negro is more nearly allied to the oran outang, than to the human kind.

Hence it appears that a state of slavery is in its operation as mischievous to the master as to the slave. If its effects on the latter are more visible in his corporeal structure, in his debased physi-

ognoomy, his dejected countenance, his lacerated skin, and not unfrequently in his wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores ; its effects on the mind of the former are not less perceivable, in the most inveterate prejudice, a pride which spurns the restraints of justice, a violence which is deaf to the dictates of compassion — in a word, in a capricious and uncontrollable self-will, which lays waste all the finer sensibilities of the soul, and renders its possessor too often a rebel to his God, a torment to himself, and a terror to his fellow-creatures.

Sixteen years have now elapsed since the abolition of the slave trade, and during this period few or none of those improvements have taken place in the treatment of slaves, which were expected to result from that measure. At that time it was generally contended, that as the planters would be necessitated thenceforth to keep up the number of their slaves, without the aid of fresh importations, this itself would draw after it such an amelioration in the management of them, as would ensure the happiest results, without legislative interference. The interest of the proprietors, it was supposed, would so obviously coincide with the dictates of humanity, as to give these the force of law. It is too manifest, however, from the event, that in forming this conclusion

we did not take sufficiently into account the short-sightedness of rapacity, the force of habit, the contagion of example, and the incurable propensity of human nature to abuse absolute power in whatever hands it is placed. The enormities which formerly characterised the slave system, have suffered little or no abatement; all its most odious peculiarities are retained, while, by the just retribution of Providence, the planters are reduced to the utmost embarrassment and distress.

After witnessing such an obstinate adherence to a system, equally injurious to the Negroes and to themselves—after every suggestion of improvement has been indignantly rejected, and not a single effort made in behalf of the slave population, if we except a few verbal enactments, passed with no other view, it is evident from the event, than to elude inquiry and silence complaint—it would be more than vain, it would be foolish and preposterous, to look for any substantial redress from Colonial Legislators. *They* are the aggressors, *they* are the authors of the evils we complain of; and how can it be expected they should legislate against themselves? To leave the slaves in *their* hands, what is it less than to recommend the lamb to the protection of the wolf?

Slavery, considered as a perpetual state, is as incapable of vindication as the trade in slaves: they are integral parts of the same system, and, in point of moral estimate, must stand or fall together. If it be unjust to sell men into slavery, who are guilty of no crime, it must be equally so to retain them in that state; — the last act of injustice is but the sequel and completion of the first. If the natives of Africa were originally despoiled of their freedom by rapine and violence, no man is entitled to avail himself of the condition to which they are reduced, by compelling them to labour for his benefit; nor is it less evident, that they could not possibly transmit the forfeiture to their children of those rights which they never forfeited for themselves. Thus it appears, that the claims of the planters to hold their Negroes in perpetual bondage, is vitiated in its *origin*; and having commenced in an act of injustice, can never acquire the sanction of right.

But here we are most anxious to guard against the misrepresentation of our sentiments. Convinced as we are that Negro slavery is most iniquitous in its origin, most mischievous in its effects, and diametrically opposite to the genius of Christianity, and of the British Constitution, we are yet far from proposing a sudden revolution. Universal experience shews, that in the body

politic, no less than in the natural, inveterate diseases admit only of a slow and gradual cure; and we should deprecate an immediate emancipation almost as much as the planters themselves, from a full conviction that the debasing operation of slavery long continued, disqualifies its subject for performing the functions, and enjoying the immunities of a free citizen.

Our object is, in the first place, to produce such an amelioration of their treatment, as shall soften the rigour of their bondage; and, in the next, that provision for their moral and religious instruction, which, by developing their faculties and improving their character, may ultimately qualify them for the possession of the freedom, of which they have been cruelly deprived. With this view, we wish to see the competency of Negro evidence established, as the only efficient check to wanton barbarity—the employment of rewards, as well as punishments—the instruction of the slaves in the principles of the Christian religion—the uninterrupted enjoyment of the sabbath—the institution of marriage, and the inviolability of its rights firmly established—the exclusion of the cart whip from the field of labour—together with the repeal of that abominable law, which renders them liable to be sold in execution for the payment of their master's debts. If, in addition to these most

wholesome regulations, facilities were afforded for the purchase of their freedom, similar to those which have been adopted in the old Spanish Colonies with the happiest effect, freedoms would be gradually obtained, in such proportion and in such numbers only, as would perfectly consist with the security and tranquillity of the Colonies. Thus a race of freemen, fitted by their constitution and their habits for the employments of a tropical climate, united with us by civil and religious ties, would rise up in the room of the present wretched victims of oppression—a race, that having a country to preserve, and rights to defend, would be a source of national strength, instead of inspiring terror and distrust.

The superiority of free labour, in point of emolument, to the labour of slaves, having been demonstrated by such an ample induction of facts that it may be safely classed with the most established maxims of political economy, the practice of gradual emancipation would be of essential benefit to the planters, and greatly augment the value of our West India possessions. Indeed there cannot be a more cogent proof of the folly of pertinaciously adhering to the present system, than the acknowledged inability to sustain a competition with the growers of sugar in the East Indies. In order to raise the price of East India

produce, so as to enable the planter in the West to keep the market, an extra duty is imposed to a large amount, and the people of England are obliged to pay upwards of two millions a year more for that article, than would be necessary if a fair competition were allowed; in other words, the inhabitants of Great Britain are assessed to the amount of more than two millions annually, for no other purpose than to maintain the slave system in the West Indies; and, in opposition to the dictates of humanity, the precepts of religion, and the principles of political economy and impartial justice, we contribute more to perpetuate our own disgrace, than it would be deemed prudent to bestow in the purchase of the greatest blessing. All our plans of domestic improvement, joined to all the efforts which we make for the diffusion of religion and virtue in foreign nations, our Schools, our Bible Societies, and our Missions, justly considered as the peculiar glory of the age, cost us a mere scantling, compared to what is annually devoted to that very pious and benevolent object, the perpetuation of slavery in the West Indies;—we throw mites into the treasury of the sanctuary, and heap ingots on the altar of Moloch.

And why, it is natural to ask, why is it necessary to load the importation of sugar from the

East Indies with such heavy duties, in order to enable the growers of the same article in an opposite quarter of the globe, at not one-third the distance, to sustain a competition? Purely because the East India sugar is produced by the labour of freemen, the West India by the labour of slaves. The industry of the former is animated by hope, that of the latter, depressed by despair;—one is sustained by the energies of nature, the other extorted by the mechanical operation of the lash;—the former labour for themselves, the latter for their master;—and such is the distinction between these two species of industry, that it more than annihilates the local difference between three or four, and twelve thousand miles. Surely the good sense of the nation will at last awake to a perception of this flagrant enormity, and express its impatience at the ignominy and injustice of such an assessment, in that firm and constitutional tone which the Legislature will not despise.

Let us not be discouraged, if in this great enterprise, our attempts are not immediately crowned with success. The slave trade, be it remembered, was long upheld by a combination of private interests, in opposition to the remonstrances of reason, humanity, and religion; but it fell at last. Such, unquestionably, will be the fate of slavery. It may, like its twin brother, be supported for a

time, by that grand obstruction to all enlightened legislation, the opposition of interested individuals, who may obscure truth by sophistry, and intimidate justice by a formidable array of influence ; but it is one of the felicities of a free country that nothing can be permanent which will not sustain the ordeal of inquiry and the shock of discussion.

We indulge a hope, though the measures of Administration during the last Session of Parliament, fell far short of our wishes, that it was from a want of resolution, more than of good intention, that they have formed on the whole a correct view of the subject, and that they are not unwilling to receive that support from the expression of the public mind, which a combination of private interests renders necessary. Be this as it may, as we are always answerable for the evils which it is in our power to prevent, and some of the greatest disorders in society have been corrected by the interference of the public, through its constitutional organs, we cannot continue passive spectators of a system, which inflicts interminable degradation and misery on eight hundred thousand of our fellow subjects, without deeply partaking of its guilt.

The scene of their suffering is distant indeed, but not so remote as to exempt them from the operation of our laws ; they form an integral part

of the British Dominions, and woe to that nation which extends its power to those from whom it withholds its justice. That distance, which did not secure them from spoliation and captivity while in Africa, should not be allowed for a moment to intercept our attention to their welfare and commiseration of their sufferings, now that they are transported to the West Indies. Through the aid of the public voice the Government of the day carried triumphantly in 1807 the great question of the abolition of the Slave Trade. Let us endeavour by a simultaneous movement to strengthen the hands of the present Administration, if as we hope they are well disposed, to stimulate them if they are sluggish, and to propel them at all events in the right direction, by such a firm and unanimous display of the public sentiment and feeling on this great occasion, as no free Government will think it proper to neglect; that we may, though late, make some reparation for the accumulated injuries of ages that are past, and signalize our connexion with Africa by other characters than those of rapine, violence and blood.

We cannot suppose for a moment that Government will suffer the extraordinary conduct recently displayed by the local authorities of Jamaica, to have any influence in preventing its adoption of such measures for the amelioration of

the present system, as justice and humanity may dictate. To be bearded and insulted by persons in their situation, would be mortifying enough ; if the ridicule attached to their proceedings, did not interfere with more serious emotions. To say that Government has nothing to fear from the West India Islands would be scarcely correct, for we have much fear, but it is not from their strength, but their weakness, which is such, that were we to withdraw our support, they would fall like ripe fruit, into the lap of the first invader. They are so much accustomed, it seems, to proceed by the method of intimidation, as to forget their absolute dependence on Great Britain for protection, as well from domestic, as from foreign dangers ; nor could we wish them a more cruel revenge, than to leave them to their own resources. — If by adopting such regulations as the humanity and wisdom of Parliament shall prescribe, they can make it clearly appear that their pecuniary interests are affected (which in our opinion will be impossible) let them by all means receive a suitable compensation ; but let us be permitted at the same time, to express our hope, that Government will not be diverted from its course by the growling of a tiger, which refuses to quit its prey.

The interference then of an enlightened public, to circulate information, to strengthen the hands

and second the movements of Government, in this most just enterprise, is imperiously demanded. We cannot sit still year after year, silent spectators of the most enormous oppression exercised within the limits of the British Dominions, without partaking of its guilt. We cannot remain silent and inactive, without forgetting who we are, and what we have done; that we are the country which after a tedious struggle with a host of prejudices arrayed in support of opulent oppression, have overthrown the Slave Trade, torn it up by the roots, and branded in the eyes of all nations the sale of human flesh, as the most atrocious of social crimes. We must forget that we are the countrymen of Granville Sharp, who by incredible exertions succeeded at length in purifying the British soil, from this its foulest pollution, and rendered it for ever impossible for a slave to breathe its air. We must sever ourselves from all alliance of spirit with a Wilberforce and a Clarkson, who looked forward to the final emancipation of the Negro race as the consummation of their labors, and were sustained in their arduous contest, by the joy which that prospect inspired. We must lose sight of still more awful considerations, and forget our great Original, "who hath formed of one blood all nations of men, to dwell on all the face of the earth."